

## Strained Relations

by GreenReticule

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## Strained Relations

A Sangheili Phantom approached the docking bay of the station. The mounted turrets followed its course inwards while the MAC cannon focused on the cruiser from which the Phantom had come. It had been four years since any negotiations had occurred between them, and three years since any human had even seen Arbiter Thel 'Vadam.

It was said that the shattering of the treaty was what had killed Terrance Hood. The final time he and the Arbiter stood face to face, they had not shaken hands. That meeting, Admiral Hood had convinced Admiral Serin Osman to come; all aspects of the United Nations Space Command needed to show the Arbiter their trust, if the cease-fire was to continue, Office of Naval Intelligence included.

As the Arbiter had entered the conference room, Hood had approached with a smile, almost as if welcoming an old friend. His hand came up to welcome the Sangheili. It was not reciprocated.

For a moment it looked like the Arbiter would have, like he wanted to. His long fingers had curled gently in on themselves as he regarded the outstretched hand with sorrow. When he spoke, his words were heavy, laced with an edge directed at Osman.

The assault on 'Vadam, a few months prior: did The Servants of Abiding Truth have the aid of the UNSC?

He had left with none of his questions answered and all of his questions answered.

As the Sangheili turned to leave, and Hood turned to face her, Osman saw the same look in both their eyes. Betrayed.

She felt no remorse for the Arbiter. She had done what was necessary. Hood's anger penetrated deeper, but not too far. Even an honorable man such as he knew that ONI never shied away from dirt.

It was only a matter of months later that the honorable man passed on. Osman did not know why she had invited the Arbiter to the memorial. It certainly was not out of guilt. Perhaps on some level she wanted to see if she could play him politically.

The Arbiter came. The Arbiter left. He said nothing to anyone and left only an arum at the base of the headstone.

As one of her advisors in ONI, Dr. Evan Phillips was there. Osman could tell from the way he fidgeted that he desperately wanted to speak to 'Vadam. Only common sense saved him; the Arbiter would not take kindly to a spy he had once hosted in good faith.

That was the last seen of Thel 'Vadam until he stepped from the Phantom onto the steel of the station. Osman watched from the screen of the conference room, the Spartan-II Naomi beside her. While she did not expect any sort of assault from the Arbiter, it was better to be safe than dead. After all, once you stripped it down to its bare bones, Sangheili politics was little more than murder.

\* \* \*

><p>Two Spartan-IVs met 'Vadam as an escort, while others kept their eyes fixed on the Sangheili crew onboard the Phantom. The crew of the docking bay regarded him with worry, and the grip the Spartans had on their weapons was telling. 'Vadam had heard rumors of <em>The</em> Spartan being discovered alive once more. It did not surprise him, but it did make him wish for the warrior's company. It strangely hurt to think that The Spartan was the only human with whom Thel could envision clasping hands in friendship. Or even simply trust.

It was on the issue of trust that Lak had lectured him as he prepared to depart for the meeting. His old friend and mentor spoke with him as the latest meeting with the Elders dissolved. Alone in confidence, the Elder said, "You truly mean to answer this plea for aid?"

"Osman is too proud to 'plea,' but yes I do."

Lak shook his head, "Were it the former Admiral, I would question less. But this one has proved that human politics is little more than lies and deceit. Let them burn."

Thel's neck stiffened at those words; he had seen enough burning for seven lifetimes.

"Following thisâ€| Didactâ€| and his edicts would little better than following the Hierarchs," Thel met Lak's gaze squarely as he said, "I will not see our people ruled again by a lie."

Outside, buildings stood tall, not yet worn by the generations that ate at the rest of the halls and homes of 'Vadam. Buildings erected in defiance years prior. 'Vadam was not a keep that could fall so easily.

The eyes of the kaidon examined them through the window. Only partly

to Lak, he said, "Enough innocent lives have been ended by lies."

\* \* \*

><p>Aboard New Phoenix Station, doors slid open to a conference room. The Arbiter saw the Admiral rise to greet him, and he was not prepared for the surge of hatred that jolted through him. For a moment, his eyes were blinded to all but a slender neck grasped and a lying tongue silenced with a blade.</p>

From the other side of the room, Osman saw the Arbiter enter. Saw his neck stiffen, and saw his deliberate motion to clasp his hands behind his back, away from his sword. The Spartan-IVs saw the gesture as well, though to them the intention was not clear. Osman dismissed them swiftly with a "Thank you," and they hesitantly left, both sparing one last glance at the Sangheili. The door closed behind them.

Not leaving her end of the table, Osman gave a nod, "Arbiter."

"Admiral," the nod was returned, and his gaze flicked over to Naomi, and he found himself extending the greeting, "Spartan."

A nod, and a calculated shift of her grip on the rifle.

He returned his gaze to the Admiral. She met it with her own.

The first time Hood and the Arbiter met after the war, there was a lack of small talk. Osman had watched as they made their agreements, and then simply stood, both at a loss for what to say next. This was not that silence.

\* \* \*

><p>Elsewhere on New Phoenix Station, hands fiddled with a puzzle cube. Usually Dr. Evan Phillip's fingers were deft and sure, but this time they quivered against the toy. So he kept at it, knowing that the familiar motions should calm his hands and his mind.</p>

Paperwork and anthropology journals were left on the desk next to him. Neatly organized, but ignored nonetheless. His hands still toyed with the cube but found themselves aching for an \_arum\_. \_The\_ \_arum\_.

An \_arum\_ contained many layers of cultural significance to the Sangheili, a multi-tiered wooden ball crafted to release the core once all the levels aligned. The core, or a message. Like the one delivered to him by 'Telcam, the leader of the Servants of Abiding Truth, while he was a guest in 'Vadam's keep. Perhaps like the one 'Vadam had left at the base of Admiral Hood's headstone.

Phillips made a mistake.

There was a specific order to solve the cubed puzzle, and Phillips knew he'd done something wrong. He set it down and turned an eye to the neat paperwork and stacked journals. His attention there did not last long, but returned to the unfinished cube.

Sometimes a mistake in a puzzle could be easily solved. A simple step back and then ten more forward. Other times the mistake was not immediately addressed, and the farther you traveled from it, the harder it would be to fix. In those cases, it was often best to just start it all over from the wretched beginning.

Four years ago, he saw 'Vadam briefly, and the look the Sangheili had spared him was enough to fill him with the remorse Osman had so casually refused.

\* \* \*

><p>Casual was not the defining trait of the conference room. The silence had been broken, and negotiations were underway, but ever present sat a tension.</p>

"So at least a third of the kaidons have pledged loyalty to 'Mdama?"

"In combination with the renegade force he already has and these Prometheans, 'Mdama has a heavy number of supporters," the Arbiter said. "I would not be surprised if they made an attempt for Requiem."

"Infinity has proven to be a good deterrent in the past."

"You would leave Earth defenseless?"

"Are you making an offer to aid the UNSC?"

The Arbiter turned to the window of the conference room. Below was a planet he had seen only thrice before. His eyes examined it through the glass. He wondered where exactly the Composed city of New Phoenix laid, and how far it was from Voi. "Do you need my aid?"

"Would you grant it to others?"

"I still respect the cease-fire." Thel swallowed the accusation that threatened to follow his declaration.

"And yet there have been assaults on our vessels by UNSC weaponry in the hands of Sangheili."

"You gave a devout follower of the Forerunners your aid and you are surprised when they turn those weapons against you at the behest of one of their gods?" The words slipped out in a snarl. He gripped his own wrist tighter and turned to face at the Admiral who had closed the distance between them by a few steps.

"The Didact is dead."

"It never stopped their actions before." A slow breath and these words came out calmly. It was a brittle calm â€"

"Did you or did you not assault UNSC vessels?"

â€" that shattered.

"Is this a negotiation or a trial? I will not be accused again by liars!" Something feral and primal spat out these words. They were

barely words, treading a fine line between English and Sangheili. In his rage, Thel had taken only two steps to loom over the Admiral, dominating her space as he spat at her.

The rage passed. Osman could see Naomi's weapon lower in the window's reflection. The Arbiter's hands were stiffened dangerously close to his blade. Even a perfect shot from the Spartan-II would not have been quick enough to save Osman and the station would have had two dead diplomats.

A full step back for a Sangheili was a fair distance, and that was the space that the Arbiter placed between them. Calmness slid over his features again and Osman was not sure if it was internal or merely a mask. The thought unnerved her, but she kept her own features unaffected. His hands did not return to their clasped place behind his back. It either meant he trusted himself enough not to kill Osman, or he was no longer adverse to the idea.

Within the space of the step back, Thel turned his mind around. It frustrated him, his loss of control. Even nearing five years of leadership of Sangheilios, he never truly had to be a politician on his planet and even less so with Hood. Admiral Osman, however was no Terrance Hood, an unfortunate truth that did not change the fact that Thel was still no politician. A battlefield was his place of conflict.

Thus his mind turned. A silent, simple warrior's exercise he mentally recited. Jiralhanae would not be trusted with a sniper's post. An Unggoy would not be given command of a unit. Not even a Sangheili commander would be given all posts. Each one had a place on the field and each worked together, regardless of how little love was between them.

What would he have said to Hood? A small little phrase, locked inside layers of wood came to him. He pushed it aside in favor of, "No one under my command assaulted the UNSC, and" "he gave the Admiral a short nod " "were you to require it, I would grant you aid."

Again, out the window he glanced, "I wish to see no more lives taken by a war they did not choose."

Osman saw the calmness slip for a moment as he looked at Earth. Again he had left an accusation unspoken. The way 'Telcam took my people's lives. The way \_you \_took their lives. Remorse was as far from her as ever. Osman had made the deals, had called the shots, all to protect the UNSC. And 'Vadam's hands were far from being the cleanest. If indeed she had the blood of 'Vadam keep on her head, then the Arbiter was far more drenched than she ever would be.

Perhaps he knew that. Perhaps that was what kept those accusations from meeting the air.

\* \* \*

><p>Evan Phillips' hands felt heavy. The unfinished cube danced from one hand to the next as he tossed it back and forth. It was no further solved than when he first realized a mistake was made.</p>

He had not been spying for the Servants of Abiding Truth. The timing of his stay and 'Telcam's coup had simply been an obnoxious coincidence.

The cube stopped at a hand. Phillips turned it over, examining where he could go from there.

But he had been spying â€“ for the UNSC. For ONI. Who was supporting 'Telcam.

The rest of the Kilo-Five team was not cruel in their disagreement with his conscience, but they vocalized it. Some were more harsh than others and Osman was more unwavering than most. Yet that pesky shame did not leave.

Phillips saw a way out. A simple twist of this section and the puzzle cube was again on its way to resolution.

And as soon as his fingers had made the move, the cube was left abandoned on the desk, his chair empty, and the door was hissing shut behind Phillips as his footsteps carried him quickly down the hall.

\* \* \*

><p>The Admiral and Arbiter did not shake hands. The negotiations finalized â€“ for now â€“ they simply gave each other a nod, the Arbiter extending the same again to the Spartan. No small talk arose as Osman and Naomi followed the Sangheili out.</p>

The presence of the Admiral and Spartan-II helped alter the mood from his arrival, but not by much. The grips on their weapons were still telling and the workers at the docking bay were either staring or conspicuously uninterested. The Sangheili troops aboard the Phantom displayed similar traits. All were eager to break contact.

Admiral Osman and the Spartan-II stopped a number of meters from the Phantom. Thel walked on alone, not looking back. He heard a door hiss open to the bay.

"Arbiterâ€|"

Were it not for the tension-born silence, Dr. Evan Phillips would not have been heard. Osman bit back a swear. All eyes, save the Arbiter's locked on him. The Sangheili's pace towards the Phantom did not alter.

"I'mâ€| I'm sorry."

The Arbiter's head snapped around. If the Arbiter did not kill Phillips, Osman wanted to. Despite being a civilian, he usually had a good enough head about politics to keep his mouth shut. But there he stood, staring at the Arbiter like a dog begging for scraps. Or to be put down.

'Vadam began walking towards Phillips, and Osman tensed. The civilian might be the occasional fool, but he was still on her team. She shot a look to Naomi who needed no explanation. Her weapon came to the ready at once.

Phillips had to crane his neck to see the Arbiter's face as the Sangheili stopped in front of him. If the Arbiter was not oblivious to the guns trained on him, he showed no sign.

Later, Thel would confide in Lak: \_It could have been my pride. We Sangheili carry more than enough of it. Mostly though it was that I thought it was too far gone from me to ask for it. Such a request would be arrogance or foolishness. Perhaps even weakness. \_

He said, "I cannot trust you."

Everything inside Phillips grew heavy, even the air in his lungs.

Osman saw him wilt beneath the Arbiter's gaze and words. She almost ordered Naomi to take the shot for recompense.

\_And yet so often I longed to hear those words from Terrance Hood and they are now lost to me forever. How could I deny it to another?\_

"But you have my forgiveness."

The Arbiter held out his hand.

Phillips practically glowed. It was not as bright a smile as when the Arbiter first offered it over four years back, but it was deeper. It lasted longer too. It lasted after their hands had met. It lasted as the Phantom departed and the cruiser vanished into Slipspace.

Osman would have words with him later.

\* \* \*

><p>On the surface of Earth below, an <em>arum</em> had words with another man then, there, and always, locked inside tiers of wood.

\_ "So full of hate were our eyes that that none of us could see our war would yield countless dead but never victory." \_

\_ It was an honor to clasp your hand, Terrance. \_

\_ I am sorry. \_

\* \* \*

><p>AN: \_Sangheili â€“ Elite. Jiralhanae â€“ Brute. Unggoy â€“ Grunt.

—

End  
file.